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ABSTRACT

The growth of the Internet and other technologies has teachers finding themselves once again moving away from the "traditional classroom" into educational domains that have no physical boundaries and incredible potential for interaction and collaboration among classroom participants. A hybrid course maximizes this potential by offering two very different environments--the traditional physical classroom and the online space of the Internet--for course members to interact with one another and the course material thus creating expanded opportunities for uniquely reaching students with different learning styles, backgrounds, and educational goals. The success of these hybrid courses, however, is complicated by the degree to which educators can effectively help students become active members of both the online and the face-to-face learning communities, overcoming online inequity issues and even the interference of technology itself. Along with traditional in-class discussion and meetings that occur once a week, each student has journal space, class forums for posting threaded discussions, chat rooms for synchronous meetings, message boards, space to post/comment on drafts, and of course, e-mail. But students who are struggling simply to find their academic voice may very well discover that this struggle only intensifies in a hybrid course. Current research shows that the type of computer mediated communication used does effect the interaction of its users and ultimately in a course like a hybrid, effects the development of a classroom community. Therefore, it is vital for instructors to be active in creating spaces in both environments for students to speak, because it is becoming all too apparent that "the new technology, when left unattended, creates more opportunities for oppression than for liberation." (Contains 16 references.) (NKA)

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Making Connections in Our Classrooms

Online and Off

L M. Smelser

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The idea of students collaborating is not a new concept. Bruffee traces the connection between collaborative learning and American college classrooms to the 1970's when it was discovered that large numbers of students who, by all indications, should have been succeeding were actually failing. The solution, although somewhat radical at the time, was to move away from the traditional classroom setting that seemed to have failed these students and into collaborative groups (Bruffee 636).

With the growth of the Internet and various other technological developments, we now find ourselves once again moving away from the "traditional classroom" into educational domains that have no physical boundaries and incredible potential for interaction and collaboration among classroom participants. A hybrid course maximizes this potential by offering two very different environments—the traditional physical classroom and the online space of the Internet—for course members to interact with one another and the course material thus creating expanded opportunities for uniquely reaching students with different learning styles, backgrounds and educational goals. However, while there are many benefits to hybrid courses (defined here as a course in which students meet at least once a week in a traditional classroom and participate in synchronous and asynchronous online activities throughout the semester), the success of these classes are complicated by the degree to which educators can effectively help students become active members of both the online and the face-to-face learning communities overcoming online inequity issues and even the interference of technology itself.

Interaction in a hybrid occurs on a variety of levels. Along with the traditional in-class discussion and meetings that occur once a week, students are given multiple online opportunities as well. For instance, each student has online journal space which he or she may make available to the instructor for feedback or to class members as part of a discussion prompt. There are also class forums for posting threaded discussions, chat rooms for synchronous meetings, message boards for announcements, space to post and comment on drafts and of course e-mail.

In addition, new technologies are being developed even as we speak. Internet II, a more advanced information superhighway aimed at improved educational opportunities, is in the works and programs such as the INCA system which informs the user who accesses a World Wide Web site of the presence of other participants. The system allows students to "interact with other people reading course-related documents within the site at the same time" (Contreras, et al Abstract).

Therefore, a hybrid is in a unique position to present benefits that single format courses cannot. For example, the traditional classroom space offered in a hybrid gives students the opportunity to begin interacting in the traditional physical setting with which they have more experience and thus may develop the "norms and practices of the communication group" that Postmes, et al. cite as a integral part of online collaboration, without the ambiguities often presented by technology for many students of solely online courses (16).

Meanwhile the online course space encourages active learning that may not occur in a traditional classroom setting, where students may arrive, take their seats and do little more during the session than stare at the instructor. For while it may seem that the fact that the student is physically present and thus the instructor may more easily discern the students failure to connect with the material and the classroom community, it may just as easily be argued that in an online environment, a student's failure to create a place for himself/herself creates a much more noticeable gap (Palloff and Pratt 7). It could be argued that the gap in an online environment could actually disrupt the class or small group's work to the point that class members then take on the responsibility previously left to the instructor, of ensuing that everyone participates.

In classes that use computer mediation for such a large portion of the course as does a hybrid, interaction becomes dependent on not only students' willingness to participate in a discussion, but on their willingness to do so in a computer mediated setting because incorporating technology is in itself a collaborative act. All members determine how the Internet is used in the classroom for while an instructor can introduce an online chat forum or a message board for

posting drafts, the meaning, frequency and content will be determined by the group norms established by interaction among class members determined by personality, experience with technology, knowledge of the subject matter and so forth (Postmes, Spears, and Lea 2). The online environment situates students in positions where they must participate to even be considered "present" in the class session, but as Palloff and Pratt observe "Although a student who is unsuccessful in the face-to-face classroom may do well online it is unrealistic to expect that all students will do well" (8). Their solution to this situation is to allow the struggling student to return to the face-to-face environment, which is what makes the hybrid a very appropriate solution for aiding students of varying learning styles. A student struggling in one format has the opportunity not only to return to their comfort zone, but because the two are so closely intertwined in the hybrid they then have the possibility of examining their struggle and to explore what this means for them as students and as members of a classroom community.

However, before any further issues related to online interaction can be addressed, there is one obvious problem that must not be over looked. Students who are struggling simply to find their academic voice, may very well discover that this struggle only intensifies in a hybrid course. According to Duin and Hansen a student's discomfort and inexperience with even traditional academic interations, by which I mean discussions in the physical classroom may be intensified in an online setting. Therefore, while students who are more experienced interact with instructors online in a very similar way to a traditional classroom, students who are struggling to become a part of academia are more apt to avoid online interactions with outspoken students and instructors because they feel uncomfortable and unsure of how to proceed (104). Educators must be alert to this and not assume that technology will create an automatic comfort zone for these students. Inexperienced students need to be assisted in finding their academic voice and in many cases finding the courage to use that voice in the classroom setting.

Helping students become active members of the classroom community means addressing other issues as well. For while researchers such as Palloff and Pratt may contend that in online

environments "[c]onnections are made through the sharing of ideas and thoughts; how people look or what their cultural, ethnic, or social background is becomes irrelevant factors in this medium, which has been referred to as the great equalizer" (15), positive interaction and collaboration are not natural results of computer-mediated-communication as we once may have thought. Though it would appear that an online extension of the classroom would encourage active participation from all course members, allowing for all voices to be heard, this does not happen without care and guidance; demands that ultimately require more research to understand the new territory opening up before us.

This means that popular aspects of online collaboration—such as the democratizing of the composition classroom—that is frequently touted by theorists such as Faigley and Tornow should not be assumed to occur intrinsically in an online environment. Wolfe cautions against making assumptions about who will benefit from computer-mediated-communication since her study—and others that she has examined—raises doubts about which minority groups, if any, do gain. She advocates "diverse communication conventions" such as the combination offered in the hybrid which would assist both individuals who feel comfortable speaking in an online format and those who thrive in face-to-face environments ("Gender" 13).

Another dangerous assumption is that women will find equity in the online environment. In a second study done by Wolfe, it was shown that women typically do not receive the same converstaional support as their male peers during online discussions ("Why" 162) In addition she claims that "[w]hile women initiated as many challenges as men, …they appeared to be unprepared to defend themselves as recipients of a challenge" ("Why" 163). Studies by other researchers (Pagnucci and Mauriello) also show growing gender-related identity issues such as women expressing the belief that choosing a male pseudonym is necessary for credibility; which raises questions about the readers' responses to particular identities and issues of who feels at liberty to speak.

The question of who is being silenced and when is not new to composition studies. Nonetheless, the question becomes that much more complex when we divide a course into multiple interaction zones differentiated by the amount of mediation experienced by the members of the classroom community. There is a growing field of research in the area of "presence" a term defined by Lombard and Ditton as the extent to which something provides "media users with an illusion that a mediated experience is not mediated" (2). More specifically, they contend that it is "the extent to which a medium is perceived as sociable, warm, sensitive, personal or intimate when it is used to interact with other people" (5).

Does presence become an issue when attempting to encourage full participation by students in all realms of the hybrid? Current research is beginning to support the idea that it does. In fact, presence may perhaps become an even more significant matter as we attempt to make connections with non-traditional and minority students who at best often bring to the equation tenuous experience with technology. Research in the mid-90's demonstrated that low income and minority students tend to be "used by the computer". In other words, while upper class (predominantly white) students programmed computers and used word processing applications—i.e. learning to control the computer—lower class students used standard drills or game-like applications (Zeni 83).

Presence is quickly becoming a vital issue for composition teachers as we encounter these students whose past experiences with technology were limited to the equivalent of digital worksheets and are unaccustomed to using the classroom space of the internet for interaction. Therefore, social presence theory, which examines the match between communication media and tasks users are being asked to do via that media in order to maximize efficiency and satisfaction (Short, Williams, and Christie qtd. in Lombard and Ditton 5), is of growing significance. Current research shows that the type of CMC used does effect the interaction of its users and ultimately in a course like a hybrid, effects the development of a classroom community. For example, in a study by Yoo and Alavi the results indicated that it is possible that the same technology may be

perceived and used differently by different groups "thereby resulting in potentially different outcomes" (379). According to a study done by Rice communication media are said to differ in the extent to which they "(a) can overcome various communication constraints of time, location permanence, distribution, and distance, (b) transmit the social, symbolic, and nonverbal cues of human communication; and (c) convey equivocal information" [(Rice, 1992, p. 452) qtd. in Lombard and Ditton 5].

Therefore, the classroom portion of the hybrid takes on new significance as it becomes the context for the majority of course interaction regardless of whether it is online or off. Studies by Yagelski and Grabill suggest that a variety of factors related to course context and to students' and instructors' perceptions of CMC, which may be addressed in the physical classroom, may have played significant roles in shaping online discourse in the two mixed mode courses they examined. Among these factors, "four emerge from the data as especially important: (1) the ways in which CMC was assigned and managed by the instructor and perceived by the students; (2) the nature of the course, especially how class time was structured and how the purposes of the course were presented to and understood by students; (3) the students' perceptions in general of CMC as a communication medium; and (4) the students' sense of their roles as participants in course-related discourse, both in-class and online. These sets of factors overlapped and influenced each other in complex ways" (38). This concurs with Heeter's research in which she contends that "presence is contextual. Although the duration of feeling present may be short, presence is dependent upon a context larger than that moment to comprehend the experience" (Heeter, 7).

Therefore, it is vital for instructors to be active in creating spaces in both environments for students to speak (Weisser 4) because it is becoming all too aparent that "the new technology, when left unattended, creates more opportunities for oppression than for liberation" (Janangelo qtd. in Weisser, 2). What we need is "to develop in ourselves—and in our students—an awareness of the asymmetrical relations of power implicit in computer-mediated collaboration,

and to learn to negotiate in new ways and with new understandings the spaces we occupy for such work" (Weisser 3) and in this way we may begin to realize some of the vast potential that technology and teaching in the 21st century offers.

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